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Facing Veto, Democrats Drop Plan for Vote on Child Bill

By ROBERT PEAR
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WASHINGTON — Congressional Democrats have scrapped plans for another vote on expansion of the Children's Health Insurance Program, thus sparing Republicans from a politically difficult vote just weeks before elections this fall.



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“We are not going to change any votes” on the health insurance bill, said Representative Rahm Emanuel, at right with Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Representative Steny Hoyer last fall.

Before the summer recess, Democrats had vowed repeatedly to force another vote on the popular program. But Democrats say they have shifted course, after concluding that President Bush would not sign their legislation and that they could not override his likely veto.

Mr. Bush vetoed two earlier versions of the legislation, which he denounced as a dangerous step toward “government-run health care for every American,” and the House sustained those vetoes.

Congress returns on Monday for a session expected to last three or four weeks. Lawmakers say they will focus on energy legislation, essential spending bills and efforts to revive the economy and to create jobs.

The fight over the children's insurance program prefigures a larger legislative debate, expected to start next year, over the future of health care and the role of government in providing it.

Representative Rahm Emanuel of Illinois, chairman of the House Democratic Caucus, said: “We are not going to change any votes on the children's health insurance bill. We still don't have enough to override a veto. Those who opposed this bill can face the voters and explain why they believe 10 million kids should not get health coverage.”

The child health program has become an issue in some Congressional races. In almost every speech, Kay Barnes, a Democrat running for Congress in northwest Missouri, criticizes Representative Sam Graves, a Republican, for voting against the bill last year. Mr. Graves said the bill would have allowed illegal immigrants and some high-income people to get “free taxpayer-funded health care.”

House Democrats fell 13 votes short of the two-thirds majority needed to override Mr. Bush's first veto last October, and they were 15 votes short when they tried again in January.

Democrats cited several reasons for their second thoughts about the wisdom of another

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vote on the child health bill. The cost of the bill has increased, according to the Congressional Budget Office, though the revenues expected from higher tobacco taxes are about the same. Under current rules, Congress would need to find a way to defray the extra cost.

In addition, time is short, and the Congressional calendar is packed with other issues.

Bruce Lesley, president of First Focus, a bipartisan advocacy group for children, said: "We definitely would prefer for Congress to vote on the legislation next year rather than this year. Why would you pass a bill now when, in six months, you could get a better bill covering more uninsured children?"

Since it was created with bipartisan support in 1997, the program has reduced significantly the number of low-income children who are uninsured.

The Census Bureau reported last month that the number of people under 18 without health insurance had decreased, to 8.1 million in 2007, from 8.7 million in the prior year. Economists say the number could climb this year because of the weak economy and rising unemployment.

The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the bill, financed by an increase in tobacco taxes, would reduce the number of uninsured children by 4.4 million by 2013. But at the same time, the budget office says, the bill could encourage some families to substitute public for private coverage, reducing by 2.3 million the number of children who would otherwise have private coverage.

A few House Republicans in tight races might switch sides and vote for the bill, in an effort to win the approbation of voters, Democrats say. But supporters of the bill believe that they would still not have enough votes to override a veto by Mr. Bush.

Hispanic, black and Asian-American members of Congress have complained that the bill does not provide coverage for legal immigrants who are now generally barred from benefits under Medicaid and the children's health program during their first five years in the United States.

Many Democrats would like to lift those restrictions. But if they tried to do so, they could draw Congress into a bitter debate over immigration policy.

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